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**Opening Extract from...**

# Year Zero

## A History of 1945

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# PROLOGUE

There was something about my father's story which baffled me for a long time. His experience of the Second World War was not a particularly unusual one for a man of his age and background. There are many worse stories, yet his was bad enough.

I was quite young when I first heard about my father's war. Unlike some people, he was not reticent about it, even though some memories must have been painful to recall. And I enjoyed hearing them. There was also an illustration of sorts provided by tiny black-and-white photographs, stuck in an album which I retrieved from a drawer in his study for my private pleasure. They were not dramatic images, but sufficiently strange for me to wonder at: pictures of a primitive workers' camp in eastern Berlin, of my father grimacing grotesquely to sabotage an official photograph, of officious-looking Germans in suits adorned with Nazi insignia, of Sunday outings to a lake in the suburbs, of blond Ukrainian girls smiling at the photographer.

These were the relatively good times. Fraternizing with Ukrainians was probably forbidden, but memories of those women still produce a wistful look in my father's eyes. There are no photographs of him almost dying from hunger and exhaustion, of being tormented by vermin, of using a waterlogged bomb crater as a common toilet as well as the only

available bath. But these hardships were not what baffled me. It was something that happened later, after he had come home.

Home was the largely Catholic town of Nijmegen in the east of Holland, where the Battle of Arnhem took place in 1944. Nijmegen was taken by the Allies after heavy fighting, and Arnhem was the bridge too far. My grandfather had been posted there in the 1920s as a Protestant minister to take care of a relatively small community of Mennonites.* Nijmegen is a border town. You could walk to Germany from my father's home. Since Germany was relatively cheap, most family holidays were spent across the border, until the Nazi presence became insufferable even for tourists round about 1937. Passing by a Hitler Youth camp one day, my family witnessed young boys being severely beaten by uniformed youths. On a boat trip along the Rhine, my grandfather caused (perhaps deliberate) embarrassment among German passengers by reciting Heinrich Heine's poetic ode to the Rhine maiden, *The Lorelei*. (Heine was Jewish.) My grandmother decided that enough was enough. Three years later, German troops came pouring across the border.

Life went on, even under German occupation. It was, for most Dutch people, as long as they were not Jewish, still oddly normal, at least in the first year or two. My father entered Utrecht University in 1941, where he studied law. To have a future as a lawyer, it was (and to some extent still is) imperative to become a member of the fraternity, the so-called student corps, which was exclusive and rather expensive. Although socially respectable, being a Protestant minister did not earn enough to pay all my father's bills. So a maternal uncle from the more affluent side of the family decided to subsidize my father's social obligations.

However, by the time my father joined, student fraternities had already been banned by the German authorities as potential hives of resistance. This was soon after Jewish professors had been expelled from the

* To avoid confusion, I should mention that Dutch Mennonites are very different from their American brethren. Dutch Mennonites tend to be rather progressive, open to other faiths, and not at all reclusive. The opposite tends to be true of American and German Mennonites, which caused a certain degree of awkwardness when bearded figures in old-fashioned black suits turned up on formal visits to my grandfather in Nijmegen.

universities. At Leyden, the dean of the law faculty, Rudolph Cleveringa, protested against this measure in a famous speech, his bag packed with toothbrush and a change of clothes in case of arrest, which duly came. Students, many of them from the corps, went on strike. Leyden shut down. The fraternity in Amsterdam had already been dissolved by its own members after a German ban on Jewish students.

But Utrecht remained open, and the fraternity continued to function, albeit underground. This meant that the rather brutal hazing rituals for new members had to take place in secret. First-year students, known in the corps as "fetuses," were no longer forced to shave their heads, for this would have given them away to the Germans, but it was still customary to make the fetuses hop around like frogs, deprive them of sleep, treat them like slaves, and generally humiliate them in a variety of sadistic games that happened to catch the senior boys' fancy. My father, like others of his class and education, submitted to this ordeal without protest. It is the way things were (and still are) done. It was, as they rather pedantically put it in Latin, *mos* (the custom).

In early 1943, young men were put to another, more serious test. The German occupiers ordered all students to sign a loyalty oath, swearing to refrain from any action against the Third Reich. Those who refused would be deported to Germany, where they would be forced to work for the Nazi war industry. Like 85 percent of his fellow students, my father refused, and went into hiding.

Later that year, he received a summons from the student resistance in Utrecht to return to his hometown. The reason for this remains obscure. A stupid mistake, perhaps, made in a moment of panic, or it may just have been a case of incompetence; these were students, after all, not hardened guerrilla fighters. My father arrived at the station with his father. Unfortunately, the Nazis had chosen just that moment to round up young men for labor in Germany. The platform was blocked on both sides by the German police. Threats were made that parents would be held responsible for any escapes. Worried about getting his parents in trouble, my father signed up. It was a thoughtful, but not a particularly heroic act, which still

bothers him on occasion. He was transported, with other men, to a nasty little concentration camp, where Dutch thugs were trained by the SS in the savage techniques of their trade. After a brief time there, my father spent the rest of the war working in a factory in Berlin manufacturing brakes for railway trains.

This was a mixed experience, at least at first. As long as they did not actively resist the Germans, Dutch student workers were not put in concentration camps. The tedium of factory work, the shame of laboring for the enemy, and the physical discomforts of sleeping in freezing and verminous barracks even had their compensations. My father recalls attending concerts of the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler.

Things at the Knorr Brakes factory may also not have been all that they seemed. A taciturn, dark-haired man called Herr Elisohn tended to slink away when approached by the Dutch student workers, and there were others who shunned too much contact, men with names such as Rosenthal. Much later, my father surmised that the factory might have been hiding Jews.

Things got much worse in November 1943, when the Royal Air Force started its long bombing campaign on the German capital. In 1944, the RAF Lancasters were joined by American B-17s. But the wholesale destruction of Berlin, and its people, really began in the first months of 1945, when bombs and firestorms were more or less constant. The Americans attacked by day, the British by night, and in April, the Soviet "Stalin Organs" started shelling the city from the east.

Sometimes the students managed to squeeze themselves into air-raid shelters and subway stations, not a privilege allowed to prisoners in concentration camps. Sometimes a hastily dug ditch was their only protection against the bombing raids, which, in my father's memory, the students both welcomed and feared. One of the worst torments was lack of sleep, for the bombing and shelling never really stopped. There was a constant din of air-raid sirens, explosions, human screams and falling masonry and glass. Yet the students cheered on the Anglo-American bombers that could so easily have killed them and in some cases did.

In April 1945, the workers' camp had become uninhabitable: roofs and walls were blown away by wind and fire. Through a contact, possibly made through one of the less Nazified Protestant churches, my father found refuge in a suburban villa. His landlady, Frau Lehnhard, had already taken in several other refugees from the wreckage of central Berlin. Among them was a German couple, Dr. Rümmelin, a lawyer, and his Jewish wife. Ever fearful of her arrest, the husband kept a revolver in the house, so they could die together if this should come to pass. Frau Lehnhard liked to sing German *Lieder*. My father accompanied her on the piano. It was, in his words, "a rare reminder of civilization" in the mayhem of Berlin's final battle.

On his way to work in eastern Berlin, my father passed through the ruined streets where Soviet and German troops were fighting from house to house. On the Potsdamer Platz, he stood behind the Stalin Organs as they bombarded Hitler's chancellery with their sinister screaming noise. It gave him a lifelong horror of big bangs and fireworks.

Sometime in late April, or possibly in early May, 1945, Soviet soldiers arrived at Frau Lehnhard's house. Such visits usually implied gang rapes of the women, no matter how old, or young, they were. This didn't happen. But my father almost lost his life when Dr. Rümmelin's revolver was discovered. None of the soldiers spoke a word of English or German, so explanations for the presence of the gun were useless. The two men in the house, Dr. Rümmelin and my father, were put up against the wall to be executed. My father remembers feeling fatalistic about this. He had seen so much death by then that his own imminent end did not come as much of a surprise. But then, through one of those freakish bits of luck which meant the difference between life and death, there appeared a Russian officer who spoke English. He decided to believe Dr. Rümmelin's story. The execution was called off.

A certain rapport was struck up between my father and another Soviet officer, a high school teacher from Leningrad. Without any language in common, they communicated by humming snatches of Beethoven and Schubert. This officer, named Valentin, took him to a pickup point

somewhere in the rubble that had once been a working class suburb of western Berlin. From there my father had to find his way to a DP (displaced persons) camp in the east of the city. He was joined on his trek through the ruins by another Dutchman, possibly a Nazi collaborator, or a former SS man. Since it had been several weeks since my father had had any proper food or sleep, he could barely walk.

Before they got much farther, my father collapsed. His dubious companion dragged him into a broken building where the man's girlfriend, a German prostitute, lived in a room up several flights of stairs. My father cannot recall what happened next; he was probably unconscious for much of the time. But the prostitute saved his life by nursing him back to a state sufficient to make it to the DP camp, where more than a thousand people of all nationalities, including concentration camp survivors, had to make do with a single water tap.

A photograph of my father taken in Holland more than six months later shows him still looking puffy from hunger edema. He is wearing a rather ill-fitting suit. It might have been the one he received from a Mennonite charity organization in the United States, which had urine stains on the trousers. Or perhaps it was a hand-me-down from his father. But, although pudgy and a little pale, in the photograph my father looks cheerful enough, surrounded by other men of his age, raising their beer mugs, mouths opened wide, cheering, or singing some student song.

He was back in his fraternity at Utrecht. This would have been in September 1945. My father was twenty-two. Because wartime initiations to the corps had occurred in secret, it had been decided by senior figures in the fraternity that the hazing rituals had to be conducted all over again. My father does not recall having to hop like a frog, or being too badly knocked about himself. This kind of treatment was reserved for younger boys who had just arrived at university, some of them perhaps fresh from camps far worse than my father's. There may have been Jewish students among them who had been hiding for years under the floorboards of houses belonging to brave Gentiles prepared to risk their necks. But my father does not remember anyone being especially bothered about such

things; no one was interested in personal stories, Jewish or otherwise; they all had personal stories, often unpleasant. As part of their initiation to the corps, the new "fetuses" were screamed at, humiliated, and even squashed into tiny cellars (a game later known in fraternity circles as "playing Dachau").

And this is what baffled me. How could my father have put up with such grotesque behavior after all he had gone through? Did no one find this peculiar, to say the least?

No, my father said repeatedly. No, it seemed normal. That is the way things were done. It was *mos*. No one questioned it. He later qualified this by saying that he would have found it unseemly to have abused a Jewish survivor, but couldn't speak for others.

It baffled me, but gradually I think I came to understand. The idea that this was *normal* seems to me to provide a clue. People were so desperate to return to the world they had known before the Nazi occupation, before the bombs, the camps, and the murders, that hazing "fetuses" seemed normal. It was a way back to the way things once were, a way, as it were, of coming home.

There are other possibilities. Perhaps to men who had seen serious violence, student games seemed relatively inoffensive, the healthy hijinks of youth. But it is more likely that the men who took to hazing with the greatest enthusiasm were those who had not experienced very much at all. Here was a chance to act tough, a pleasure that was all the more keenly felt if the victims were people who had been through a great deal more.

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THIS STORY OF MY FATHER—as I said, not as bad as many others, but bad enough—was what made me curious about what happened just after the most devastating war in human history. How did the world emerge from the wreckage? What happens when millions are starving, or bent on bloody revenge? How are societies, or "civilization" (a popular word at the time), put together again? The desire to retrieve a sense of normality is one very human response to catastrophe; human and fanciful. For the

idea that the world as it was before the war could simply be restored, as though a murderous decade, which began well before 1939, could be cast aside like a bad memory, was surely an illusion.

It was, however, an illusion held by governments as much as by individual people. The French and Dutch governments thought that their colonies could be repossessed and life would resume, just as it had been before the Japanese invaded Southeast Asia. But it was only that, an illusion. For the world could not possibly be the same. Too much had happened, too much had changed, too many people, even entire societies, had been uprooted. Nor did many people, including some governments, want the world to go back to what it had been. British workers, who had risked their lives for King and country, were no longer content to live under the old class system, and voted Winston Churchill out of office just two months after Hitler's defeat. Joseph Stalin had no intention of letting Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia restore any kind of liberal democracy. Even in western Europe many intellectuals saw communism, wrapped in the morally cozy gown of "antifascism," as a more viable alternative to the old order.

In Asia, the incipient change was, if anything, even more dramatic. Once Indonesians, Vietnamese, Malays, Chinese, Burmese, Indians, and others too had seen how a fellow Asian nation could humiliate Western colonial masters, the notion of Western omnipotence was smashed forever, and relations could never be the same again. At the same time, the Japanese, like the Germans, having seen the vainglorious dreams of their leaders turn to ashes, were receptive to changes that were partly encouraged and partly imposed by the victorious Allied occupiers.

British and American women, whom wartime circumstances had propelled into the workforce, were no longer so content to swap their economic independence for domestic subservience. Many still did, of course, just as it took time for colonies to gain full independence. The conservative desire to return to "normal" would always vie with the wish for change, to start again from scratch, to build a better world, where devastating wars would never happen again. Such hopes were inspired by genuine

idealism. That the League of Nations had failed to prevent a (second) world war did not hamper the idealism of those who hoped, in 1945, that the United Nations would keep peace forever. That such ideals, in time, turned out to be as illusory as the notion of turning back the clock does not diminish their power, or necessarily devalue their purpose.

The story of postwar 1945 is in some ways a very old one. The ancient Greeks knew well the destructive force of the human thirst for revenge, and their tragedians dramatized ways in which blood feuds might be overcome by the rule of law; trials instead of vendetta. And history, in the East no less than the West, is littered with dreams of starting afresh, of treating the ruins of war as an open building site for societies based on new ideals, which were often not as new as people thought.

My own interest in the immediate postwar period was sparked partly by current affairs. We have seen enough examples in recent years of high hopes invested in revolutionary wars to topple dictators and create new democracies. But mainly I wanted to look back in time to understand the world of my father, and his generation. This is partly, perhaps, because of a child's natural curiosity about the experience of a parent, a curiosity that grows stronger as the child becomes older than the parent was at that time. Such curiosity is especially acute when the father was tested by hardships that the child can only imagine.

But it is more than that. For the world my father helped to create from the ruins of the war that so nearly killed him is the world that we grew up in. My generation was nurtured by the dreams of our fathers: the European welfare state, the United Nations, American democracy, Japanese pacifism, the European Union. Then there is the dark side of the world made in 1945: communist dictatorship in Russia and eastern Europe, Mao's rise in the Chinese civil war, the Cold War.

Much of this world of our fathers has already been dismantled, or is fast coming apart at the seams. To be sure, in almost every place that was affected by the last world war, life today is far better than it was in 1945, certainly in material terms. Some of things people feared most have not come to pass. The Soviet empire has fallen. The last battlegrounds of the

Cold War are on the Korean peninsula, or possibly the narrow Taiwan straits. Yet, as I write, people everywhere are talking about the decline of the West, of the United States as well as Europe. If some of the fears of the immediate postwar period have faded, so have many of the dreams. Few still believe that eternal peace will come from a kind of world government, or even that the world can be shielded from conflict by the United Nations. Hopes for social democracy and the welfare state—the very reason for Churchill's defeat in 1945—have been severely bruised, if not dashed, by ideology and economic constraints.

I am skeptical about the idea that we can learn much from history, at least in the sense that knowledge of past follies will prevent us from making similar blunders in the future. History is all a matter of interpretation. Often the wrong interpretations of the past are more dangerous than ignorance. Memories of old hurts and hatreds kindle new conflagrations. And yet it is important to know what happened before, and to try and make sense of it. For if we don't, we cannot understand our own times. I wanted to know what my father went through, for it helps me to make sense of myself, and indeed all our lives, in the long dark shadow of what came before.